Mine Action and the Environment

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Mine Action and the Environment

While global warming is a hot environmental topic these days, and scientists agree that unless we act soon to significantly reduce global pollution, average temperatures will continue to rise, causing heat waves, rising sea levels, droughts and wildfires. It is also important to look at mine-action procedures and activities to ensure our industry is in compliance with the world’s requirements on environment protection. There is perhaps a need, more than ever before, to remind national mine-action authorities and demining organisations of their responsibility to ensure that demining operations not only be carried out in a safe, effective and efficient manner, but also in a manner that minimises any impact on the environment.

by Faiz Paktian [ Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining ]

In its continued efforts to provide the mine-action community with consistent and globally relevant International Mine Action Standards, the United Nations Mine Action Service and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining have been involved in the development of a standard on the protection of the environment. This standard will provide guidelines as to the minimum measures to guarantee environments affected by demining operations, particularly stockpile destruction, are safe and fit for their intended use once demining operations are completed.

When we talk about “environment”, we mean the surrounding in which an organisation operates. The new standard will emphasise that demining operations should be carried out in a way that minimises damage to property and infrastructure and is safe for local communities and demining staff. Planning for demining operations must take into account the effects of operations and any supporting activities, on the environment, and use possible damage to property, infrastructure or personnel. Demining organisations should ensure that the land over which demining operations have taken place—including land used for administrative or support purposes, such as temporary accommodation facilities and support areas—is suitable for its intended use once demining operations cease. Particular attention should be given to property, infrastructure or land required for subsistence or economic purposes to ensure that these activities can continue after demining operations have been completed.

Activities That May Damage the Environment

Demining operations have the potential to damage the environment in which they are conducted. This damage not only includes the short-term effects caused by demobilisation activities, but also long-term effects that may be caused by contamination of soil and water systems, removal of vegetation, disruption to watercourses or changes to soil structure. Demining operations may also damage the natural habitats of insects and wildlife or affect areas of historical or cultural significance. The following are some extracts from the forth-coming standard that discusses potential demining activities that may damage the environment:

- Use of machines in support of mine clearance. Where mechanical operations involve the removal of vegetation, or occur on ground that may be subject to erosion, demining organisations must ensure that, as far as practically possible, measures are taken to secure the regeneration of vegetation and to limit erosion.
- Explosive ordnance disposal. Mines and explosive remnants of war should be disposed of in a manner that minimises environmental impact without creating damage to property or infrastructure. If mines or ERW must be destroyed in situ and there is a risk to property or infrastructure, protective measures must be taken. If, even with those measures there is still a risk of damage to property or infrastructure, authorities and local communities must be consulted about the operation.
- Disposal of debris, rubble and wire. Debris, rubble, wire and any other remains of obstacle removed from a demining worksite must be disposed of in accordance with local waste management regulations and requirements of the national authority. When applicable local communities should be consulted about such disposal.
- Disposal of toxic and hazardous waste. Toxic and hazardous waste are not normally found in landmines; however, asbestos chemicals and liquid propellants can be found in missiles and fusing systems. Also, chemical weapons—including chlorine and mustard gas munitions and depleted-uranium projectiles—may be encountered. Other examples of...
The new standard will emphasize that demining operations should be carried out in way that minimizes damage to property and infrastructure and is safe for local communities and demining staff.

Waste water. Waste water from washing, bathing or kitchen areas must be drained into soak pits large enough to take the amount of water generated.

Domestic water supply. The provision of domestic water is to be carried out in a manner that does not affect the local communities, unless the local communities have been consulted on this matter and have agreed to any arrangements made.

Fuel, oil and lubricant areas. Demining operations must ensure that procedures are in place to contain and quickly clean up any FOL spills. Contaminated materials containing spilled FOL should be collected and disposed of at controlled landfills. Alternatively, the material should be disposed of at a specific site where leakage into the soil is prevented. Where it is necessary to establish temporary facilities, precautions must be taken to ensure that FOL is stored safely and does not contaminate the soil or groundwater.

Maintenance areas. When servicing, repairing or washing vehicles, machines and equipment at worksites, specific areas must be designated for this activity. The following environmental precautions should be taken: wastewater must not be released so that it will enter watercourses; drained oil must be contained using a drip pan or other suitable receptacle and disposed of in an environmentally acceptable manner; and used parts, byproducts of maintenance or other rubbish must be disposed of properly.

Transportation of hazardous materials. During the transportation of any hazardous, toxic or flammable materials with the potential to damage the environment, precautions must be taken to ensure that risk is minimized. These should include: all materials to be transported in containers that will minimise or prevent spills or leakage; materials to be securely loaded in the transport; fire precautions to be taken relevant to the materials being transported; and vehicles carrying hazardous material to be driven in a safe and careful manner.

Stockpiles Destruction. Stockpiles of explosives used by demining organisations. In addition, and where applicable, the transport of hazardous material should be in accordance with international standards.

Aids of cultural or historical significance. Demining operations may occur in locations where there are areas of cultural or historical significance. Where this occurs, demining organisations should take all possible steps to prevent damage to these sites. Such action may dictate that any mines or ERW found at the worksite be removed to another area for destruction. In such areas, any demining operations must be planned and conducted in a manner that minimizes the impact on flora and the natural habitats of insects or wildlife. As far as practicable, all disturbed areas should be restored to their original condition.

Protection of the environment. When demining organisations are conducting operations, action in accordance with international humanitarian law or relevant national policies must be taken:

- To document its environmental management policy in national mine-action standards or other relevant publications. Such environmental-management policies must be in accordance with international humanitarian law or relevant national policies.
- To monitor compliance by demining organisations with documented environmental management requirements.
- To ensure that the protection of the environment is taken into account during planning for demining operations.
- To maintain records of reported environmental incidents; when necessary, conduct investigations into environmental incidents; and promulgate information about significant environmental incidents to other demining organisations within the programme.

HDI announces new spokesperson
The Humpty Dumpty Institute announced the appointment of a new spokesperson to the Institute, Mary Wilson (formerly of the musical group, The Supremes). Wilson works as an ambassador for HDI to raise public awareness concerning landmines and other explosive remnants of war.

Wilson is a 1988 Inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame along with Diana Ross and Florence Ballard, the two other members of The Supremes. Wilson’s travel schedule filled with clearance-related activities early; she visited the Jaffna Peninsula of Sri Lanka to review mine clearance and a dairy development program. She also visited a Laditian school food program.